

Planning at a Higher Level: Ideas, Form, and Academic Language in Student Prewriting

The author describes an easily adaptable, multi-step prewriting process—including brainstorming, group discussion, and visual representation—to help students compose sophisticated, critical essays about leadership in The Tempest.

For students, writing is too frequently a matter of going through the motions, perhaps no truer than with the traditional academic essay. Although there are many culprits for this disengagement, one is surely an over-emphasis on form—and particularly set form—to the detriment of content. This kind of misguided scaffolding is exemplified in five-paragraph themes that shoehorn ideas into generic structures, denying content and organization in any meaningful relationship. When form becomes formula, planning is stultified, losing much of its generative potential.

Yet knowing how to map ideas into effective structures *is* important, and planning certainly warrants explicit instruction. The prewriting activity I explain in this article encourages students to experience form as a *rhetorical* rather than as a *prescriptive* constraint. Emphasizing planning as a process of problem-solving, it fosters the interplay of idea-generation and organization; it encourages students to mold their form according to their ideas, and to value form as a means of making sense of content. Helping students to reflect on the quality of their ideas and how best to structure them, this collaborative approach to planning reinvests essay writing with genuine inquiry.

Whether teaching at secondary school or college, I have embraced a simple truism about writing, one that is also supported by a wide range of studies: *If students have something to say they are more likely to write effectively.* Quality prewriting helps motivate students by increasing their expertise and by spreading the cognitive load of composing, free-

ing mental resources for the actual writing. In the spirit of Brian Cambourne's *Conditions of Learning*, it serves to *immerse* students in multiple perspectives, while promoting their active *engagement* with ideas. For Michael W. Smith and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, such frontloading is important in fostering "the sense of competence that motivates activity" (35). The Carnegie Corporation meta-study *Writing Next* holds that prewriting has a "positive" (Graham and Perin 18) impact on formulating and organizing ideas in fourth- to twelfth-grade writing. And David Galbraith and Mark Torrance collate empirical evidence that prewriting, in which "ideas are generated and organized . . . prior to writing" (68), has an even higher impact on writing quality than rough drafting.

But there is prewriting and there is prewriting. It can be too easily reduced to cursory outlines or think sheets that tend to stifle, rather than liberate, thought. As Patricia A. Dunn observes, overly rigid planning can amount to "a ceremonial exercise done to satisfy the teacher" (59). According to William S. Robinson, the temptation is for teachers to "value simplistic organizational patterns more highly than . . . subtle ones" (193); prepackaged formulations encourage students "to play it safe" (194), avoiding the risks that will help them to grow into flexible writers attentive to context.

And dead plans lead to dead compositions. Formulaic essays tend to be organized as laundry lists, a series of discrete, often concrete, parallel ideas in random order. As Linda Flower has argued, such essays are developmentally limiting, inclined to privilege loose connections rather than push

students into forming more abstract, logic-based concepts. Lev Vygotsky's developmental theory identifies higher-order thinking as dependent on *complex* and *conceptual* operations (76)—the ability to sort information into networks and, ultimately, and more importantly, to draw from these relations generalizations that are more than the sum of the constituent parts. Students need practice in discovering (and rediscovering) different layers of connections so they can construct hierarchical chains of claims and sub-claims and, ultimately, the conceptual logic which not only ties these claims together, but even transcends them.

It is this conceptually based thinking I address through guided prewriting. Framing planning as a flexible, ongoing *process*, the exercise affirms the reciprocity of ideas and structure. Students literally map out complex idea-relationships and conceptual, logical frameworks to discover the architecture of their essay. Rather than encourage the application of “organizational schemes,” it invites students to “shape their material according to its nature and their aims” (Robinson 194). By scaffolding *ideas* as well as structure, what Smith and Wilhelm call knowledge of *substance* and of *form* (123), we allow students more control of their writing.

The activity is one that I use with first-year college students and with K–12 teachers, since it is just as appropriate for secondary schools. I situate it early in the academic year to stimulate dialogue about students' preconceptions of planning and composing, and to break the mold of one-size-fits-all thinking. The example described here refers to teaching an academic essay on *The Tempest*, but it can be easily adapted to other literary (or nonliterary) essays.

Synthesizing Two Activities: A Ranking Scenario and Claim Cards

The prewriting I teach consists of two main, interlinked activities, one primarily to help students focus their ideas, the other to give them shape. Together, they are designed to stimulate decision-making and to channel higher-order thinking processes, including selecting and connecting, clustering and abstracting, and prioritizing and arranging.

The first activity is a ranking scenario as outlined by Larry R. Johannessen, Elizabeth A. Kahn,

and Carolyn Calhoun Walter, adapted to target potential claims that students could make in response to the essay. The process of ranking this inventory in order of importance pushes students to grapple with ideas, selecting and prioritizing claims to refine the focus of their papers.

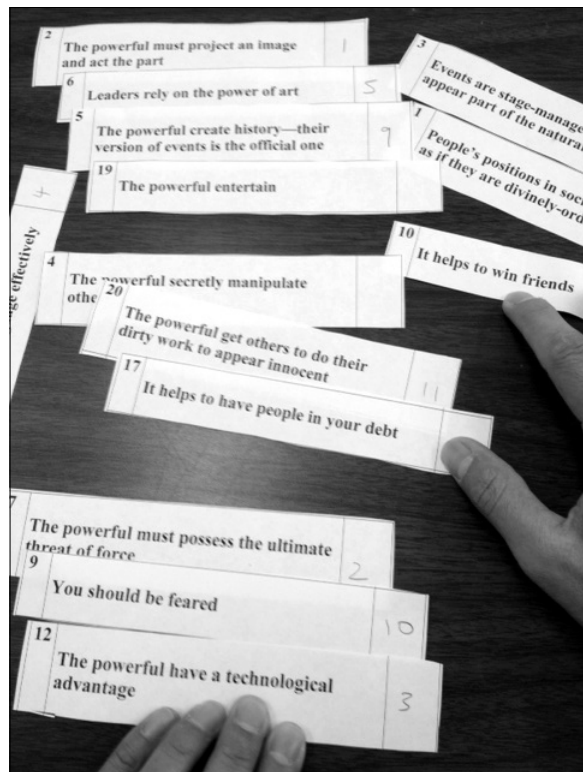
The second component is more conceptually oriented, helping students to transform their newly found focus into a series of related idea-families and then to arrange these according to both logical principles and rhetorical impact. Inspired by Dunn's “rhetorical proof cards,” this variation of the card-moving activity substitutes Dunn's focus on *proofs* (or evidence) with a choice of possible *claims*—the same claims as the ranking scenario. To help shape students' ideas, this multisensory planning activity substitutes “lockstep, predictable” procedures with oral and kinesthetic collaboration which “taps into different ways of knowing” (59). Its epigenetic quality helps students see how, in composing, one idea can lead to another; students literally “play around” with different arrangements and combinations of ideas—ideas in which they are simultaneously being immersed through the dual activities (see fig. 1).

Laying the Groundwork

The groundwork for the essay begins before reading *The Tempest*. Because I want to guide the writing, emphasizing the dynamics of planning, invention, and structure, I concentrate the reading on a shared conceptual focus: the difference between leadership and power and, in particular, the kinds of things powerful people do to achieve and maintain control—a relatable theme designed to make the play accessible to all backgrounds. By channeling analysis in this way, I can ensure that students are immersed in particular lines of inquiry throughout the reading, bolstered by two supplementary articles that offer opposing interpretations of Prospero and his role as a leader/colonizer.¹ Limited to a single essay topic, we can zero in on the micro-level critical decisions that constitute higher-order thinking. This is how I phrase the question (see appendix for a handout of the full assignment):

What does the play suggest about power, the powerful, and the methods powerful people use to control others? Referring to the play for your

FIGURE 1. As part of their prewriting, students arrange and rearrange ideas in the form of “claim cards” they may use in their essay (an idea inspired by Patricia A. Dunn’s rhetorical proof cards).



evidence, make a case for the most important considerations people need to know about how leaders gain power and maintain control.

For prereading, students brainstorm their ideas about the nature of power drawn from their observations and experiences of life and politics—in this way, students are “writing” the play, as well as their essay, before reading has started. I ask students to list as many points as they can; typical suggestions include “creating an image,” “looking and sounding the part,” “making allies,” “personal leadership qualities,” “using force,” “manipulating the media,” “acting patriotically.” As a class, we embellish the list throughout our reading, incrementally scaffolding the content knowledge needed for writing. When time comes for the essay proper, I can expect students to possess a pleasing degree of subject-matter competence—“substance”—to

be transformed into more *academic* knowledge and structures through the guided prewriting.

Prewriting in Action: Idea-Generation, Organization, and Conceptual Thinking

I include some 20 claims that could be made in response to the essay prompt, each potentially supported by the play but expressed as a general concept. For example, Prospero’s use of Ariel to report on his enemies is abstracted to: “The powerful use spies and methods of surveillance.” The academic language that students will (literally and metaphorically) “pick up and play with” attempts to both model and *channel* abstract thinking. Although most of the claims arise from students’ ongoing suggestions—albeit tweaked in language—I add some others in order to extend their thinking. The “surveillance” claim cited above is one such example. My reasoning is two-fold:

Students are encouraged to rediscover the source material by matching such claims to data and then weighing its quality and consistency. The goal of the instructional scaffold is thus not to spoon-feed ideas, but to create a hunger for inquiry.

to deepen students’ existing analyses and to push their interpretive buttons by provoking new lines of inquiry (“In what way can this play possibly relate to surveillance?”). Students are encouraged to rediscover the source material by matching such claims to data and then weighing its quality and consistency. The goal of the instructional scaffold is thus not to spoon-feed ideas, but to create a hunger for inquiry.

To facilitate the ranking scenario, I advise students to narrow their choices to a manageable number—a minimum of twelve or so core claims—yet to be mindful of breadth and variety, then to number their choices according to the value they assign to each; they can always return to “unused” claims later. I also invite students to add claims of their own as well as question (or challenge) ones on the inventory. Differentiation is thus built in as students set individual parameters.

At this stage, I am trying to stimulate thinking through dialogue—much of it “emergent”—to help students gestate an essay focus, kindled by the sense of ownership that derives from personal

choice. The ranking scenario sets the stage for flexible group and whole-class interactions with students eager to defend their priorities and prepared to unearth textual evidence to make their cases convincing. By prompting a wide range of responses, I expose students to multiple ways of approaching the essay. Students practice relational and hierarchical ways of thinking, with claims independently selected, *implicitly* compared, and prioritized in terms of importance, but then, through interaction, *explicitly* compared and weighed-up, pushing students to think about which claims possess the most mileage in terms of textual support, argumentative power, and even, perhaps, conceptual status.

The next step assists students in developing and arranging their ideas using the kinesthetic claim cards. Having pinpointed, defended, and reviewed their favored ideas, students cut their selected claims into “cards,” physically spreading them out on the desks in front of them.

The claim card activity is intended to work at a number of levels. First, students will manipulate the cards into broad categories—loose clusters or chunks that might eventually correspond to branches of a fully developed essay. Any given cluster could contain anything from a few claims to six or more. Then, at another level, students will zero in on each cluster, refining them into more complex families, prioritizing major claims over supporting sub-claims, and, through this process, sowing the seeds of future paragraphs.² Finally, students will consider each chunk in terms of an essay arc—their arrangement and their relative weighting.

In reality, these levels are interactive. Once started, students oscillate between priorities—decisions loop back on each other, frequently reciprocal and concurrent in nature. In its fluidity, the card-moving approximates the back-and-forth nature of mature composing processes. For instance, students’ initial chunks evolve as claims are moved between chunks and as idea-relations reformulated; one chunk might come to dominate, becoming the backbone of the essay, absorbing or erasing other chunks. Both within clusters and between different clusters, the activity makes problem-solving explicit. Students add, delete, substitute, and restructure ideas. They are being invited to think recursively, simultaneously prewriting and reviewing, generating, and revising.

To get the ball rolling, I have students cluster their claims into roughly three piles designed to approximate the kinds of rhetorical “turns” or branches that tend to be a feature of complex compositions. Students think of a working title for each of these chunks—reflective of their main idea—so that they can discuss their emerging “outline” with others. The idea is to move students beyond form-driven regimes—in which each paragraph signals a distinct claim—to a more organic paradigm, in which ideas evolve and eventually dictate the number of paragraphs needed. Take the following potential claims:

2. The powerful must project an image and act the part
3. Events are stage-managed so as to appear part of the natural order
5. The powerful create history—their version of events is the official one
6. Leaders rely on the power of art
19. The powerful entertain

Students thinking at a concrete level might view these as discrete ideas; however, by being asked to form clusters—to think inter-connectively—they are more likely to tease out relations. If, for example, a student picks claim number five (“The powerful create history—their version of events is the official one”), I invite the student to consider its connection to other claims; since to “create history” could be said to rely on an expertise in narrative skills, it could be linked to number 19, “The powerful entertain,” or to six, “Leaders rely on the power of art,” and so on. Generally speaking, the more claims in one chunk, the more likely it will form the main emphasis of the essay, though students will continue to move claims around, either within chunks or between chunks, considering the best ways to arrange and prioritize them.

Will these claims be synthesized into a single, rich, multilevel paragraph based around, say, the power of artistic flair? Will they form two separate but related chunks of an essay, one section perhaps devoted to Prospero’s retelling of history, another part on his ability to dazzle followers with his artistry? Or will they sustain a whole essay centered on the power of image?

The latter option—with image as the essay nucleus—could include other claims, too (such

as, “People’s positions in society should look as if they are divinely ordained,” “The powerful use language effectively,” “The powerful get others to do their dirty work to appear innocent”), lending itself to a well-rounded thesis with different layers of analysis. Indeed, students arriving at image as their central focus are surely working at a high level of abstraction, unifying their ideas around a thesis that is both logical and highly conceptual. Though attentive to the source material, such students are able to “distance” their thinking into a general, transferable principle that elevates their essay above a series of concrete claims.

Another cluster that many students favor highlights the importance of personality in a powerful ruler—and it might include any number of the following claims:

- 4. The powerful secretly manipulate others
- 8. To keep control you must control yourself
- 9. You should be feared
- 10. It helps to win friends
- 15. Leaders must have the right personal qualities
- 18. The powerful use language effectively

Again, there exists a wide range of permutations. For example, many students are keen to prioritize claim number four, manipulative skills, over other claims, and, indeed, there exists ample evidence for this in the play. Furthermore, like “image” in the previous example, “manipulation” seems to act as a logical, underlying connection between many of the other claims while possessing that abstract, “global” quality asked for by a conceptual thesis. Then again, since it also implies a strong element of artifice, perhaps manipulation would also sit well in our essay on image. How will the student choose to synthesize and arrange these different facets or “complexes”? Will character qualities remain the central conceit with sections on manipulative skills and even image—the cult of personality—perhaps included as part of this emphasis? If so, the student will gain invaluable practice in transitioning between separate but related chunks. Or will an aspect of character, such as the ability to manipulate people and events, end up forming one branch of an essay centered on image?

Once relatively stabilized, clusters themselves operate in dynamic relationships with each



Miranda – The Tempest by John William Waterhouse, 1916

other, presenting students with yet more creative possibilities. For example, some students choose to highlight the value of people skills—who you know and how you treat them—based on Prospero’s perceived benevolence and his ability to build loyal support. In such a scenario, the following two examples might form the backbone of an essay:

- 10. It helps to win friends
- 16. The powerful forge alliances and useful contacts

However, unless students had additional claims and sub-claims of their own, such an essay might end up being pretty thin and one-dimensional. It would, however, be more rounded if juxtaposed with a contrasting family of claims that, individually and collectively, speak to an entirely more underhanded, Machiavellian approach to interpersonal relations:

- 9. You should be feared
- 13. The powerful divide and rule
- 17. It helps to have people in your debt
- 20. The powerful get others to do their dirty work to appear innocent

The tension between the two clusters presents the opportunity for creative choices that lead to very different emphases. Perhaps, on reflection, this study of “friendship” belongs as part of a broader disquisition on “manipulation” after all. Alternatively, the student might champion the importance

of friends and allies, but then deepen this analysis by delving into the “underbelly” of such alliances (for example, the underlying fear Prospero instills; or more subtly, the sense of indebtedness and obligation he arguably engenders by showcasing an act of mass clemency).

By embracing such tensions, students are adding a “twist” to their thesis, in effect learning how to problematize their argument and take it to another level of sophistication. The recognition that arguments have limitations, and that these limitations can be qualified, even co-opted, adds valuable layers to students’ analyses.

Refining Students’ Plans

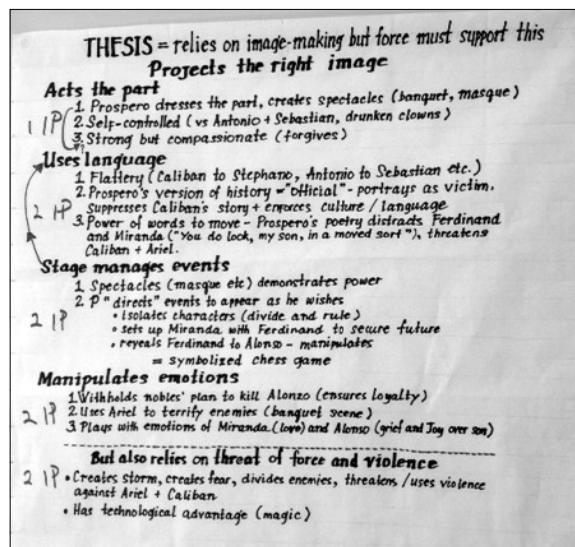
The above examples show how, starting with a somewhat adumbrated focus, students can work through the ideas in front of them to arrive at a working thesis. Rather than trying to contort ideas to a preordained thesis, the relative comfort level with “substance” means students have time to discover what they really want to say—whether emphasizing image, manipulation, personality, people skills, or another focus entirely.

Students’ personal meditations fuel discussion about the trajectory and quality of respective arguments. In groups, students use their claims cards to present and defend their planning—their concept, their major chunks (claims and sub-claims), and essay arc—and, importantly, they also defend every claim and sub-claim with evidence from the text.

Having assisted students’ ideas, I hold high expectations that they will dig deep for consistent evidence. Following Johannessen et al., I adopt the “Toulmin Model” for presenting arguments; each claim must be supported by multiple data and these data (examples, paraphrase, quotations) must be *explicitly* connected to the claim by a full justification—the warrant (17).³ Insisting on this explicit, logical approach means that paragraph designs, already multilayered from the “claim card” activity, are fashioned by meaning rather than by a “pro-forma” script.

For the final step of the prewriting, students map out their essay plans using their choice of representation—spider diagrams, bullet points, chunking, and so on. I then move them into like-minded groups with similar essay foci where they

FIGURE 2. Once students come up with lists of ideas for their essays, they gather in like-minded groups to produce master plans such as the one pictured here.




produce composite master plans on butcher paper to post around the classroom (see fig. 2). This enables each group to discuss their outline, first with supportive colleagues, then with the whole class, taking on board further suggestions and learning to anticipate counterarguments. To compare eight or so alternative plans means that students are exposed to multiple ways of how to conceptualize the essay as well as alternatives on how to set out a plan.

Transforming Thinking/ Transforming Writing

Drawing on kinesthetic, visual, and oral intelligences, and creating multiple spaces for teacher intervention, the combined activities work as an effective differential tool, with students valuing each other as a resource, and the instructor able to weave between whole-class discussion and individual support. As formative assessment, the activities make cognition explicit, providing rich data about students’ content knowledge, but also about their preconceptions of prewriting, planning, and essay-writing—allowing for the kind of “immediate feedback” recommended by Smith and Wilhelm (9).

Vygotsky reminds us that “concept formation is a creative, not a mechanical, passive, process” (54).

Encouraging flexible problem-solving skills, this prewriting activity offers students tools—including some of the language—to progress toward solutions. Throughout, students are being invited to process ideas in terms of higher-order thinking—clustering apparently disparate elements, forging increasingly complex relations, and, ultimately, drawing out logical abstractions that lend an essay a totality beyond the sum of its parts. They are not merely mapping ideas, they are *transforming* ideas. And by cultivating metacognition, the activity restructures more than writing; it reconfigures the way students think about planning and composing, helping them transfer the conceptual strategies and flexible dispositions to other writing situations. The benefits for teacher and student alike are more engaged essays based on genuine, thoughtful decisions. 

Notes

1. We study two articles with polar views of Prospero's role; for Frank Kermode, Prospero is the epitome of the harmonious Renaissance ruler, whereas, for Peter Hulme, Prospero is a colonizer, aided by technology (magic).

2. My goal for paragraphs is to give students sufficient material to create a logical momentum—what James Gray and Robert Benson call a “train of thoughts” (28)—so that ideas are rounded but also weighted in importance, with logical steps ultimately made explicit to the reader.

3. I illustrate warrants using Kermode's and Hulme's divergent interpretations of Prospero. For Hulme, Prospero's habitual use of possessives to address others, as in “my Ariel” (1.2.188) and “my girl” (1.2.61), represents a desire to own and control them (242). Kermode, on the other hand, would surely view the same quotes as signs of his “duty of care.” This contrast deftly illustrates the role of interpretive lenses and the importance of explaining how examples connect to claims—data alone does not prove a point.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In “Literary Characters on Trial: Combining Persuasion and Literary Analysis,” students brainstorm “crimes” committed by characters from *The Tempest*. Groups of students work together to act as the prosecution or defense for selected characters, while also acting as the jury for other groups. Students research several sources for their case, including the play and the Internet. All the while, students write a persuasive piece to complement their trial work. This lesson uses Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, but several other text options are provided. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/literary-characters-trial-combining-799.html>

APPENDIX. Handout on Creating and Organizing Claims and Sub-claims in *The Tempest*

What does the play suggest about power, the powerful, and the methods powerful people use to control others? Referring to the play for your evidence, make a case for the most important considerations people need to know about how leaders gain power and maintain control.

Prewriting Preparation:

1. **Rank** the claims in order of importance. You will defend your top three choices in **group discussions**.
2. **Select twelve or so claims** you consider to be the most important.
3. Cut out the claims and move them into **three or four** separate chunks to help cluster your ideas.
4. Give each cluster a **title** to reflect the main concept that underlies it. This process will help you to think about ways of creating families of interrelated claims (claims and their connected sub-claims).
5. For every claim (including sub-claims) find one piece of **evidence (data)** and practice what reasoning you will use to **connect the data to the claim (warrant)**.
6. Consider the best **sequence** to present the clusters as you will write them in your essay.
7. Be prepared to **talk about** and defend your choices in groups.
8. Design a **graphic organizer** (e.g., a web diagram or chunking) for your essay plan to put on a poster—we will share these with the class.

	Claim	Your choices
1	People's positions in society should look as if they are divinely ordained	
2	The powerful must project an image and act the part	
3	Events are stage-managed so as to appear part of the natural order	
4	The powerful secretly manipulate others	
5	The powerful create history—their version of events is the official one	
6	Leaders rely on the power of art	
7	The powerful must possess the ultimate threat of force	
8	To keep control you must control yourself	
9	You should be feared	
10	It helps to win friends	
11	Knowledge is power	
12	The powerful have a technological advantage	
13	The powerful divide and rule	
14	The powerful use spies and methods of surveillance	
15	Leaders must have the right personal qualities	
16	The powerful forge alliances and useful contacts	
17	It helps to have people in your debt	
18	The powerful use language effectively	
19	The powerful entertain	
20	The powerful get others to do their dirty work to appear innocent	
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